

CHANGING RACIAL ATTITUDES
AND
THE SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE CASE

Susan King
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My hypothesis for this project is that there was a change in attitude toward integrated learning facilities during the 1960's. In order to observe changing race relations, I chose a small southern women's college where resources were available to study an integration case. Sweet Briar College was founded in 1901 in the will of Indiana Fletcher Williams. Included in the educational trust set up by the will, were the words that the institute be for the education of "white girls and young women." In 1963 the college instituted a suit to remove the word "white" from the will to allow the college to have an open admissions policy. The questions to be answered include: why did the college desegregate; and what were faculty, student, alumnae, community and administrative opinions towards the change in the will and towards the desegregation of the college. By answering the second question first, the answer to the first question will become evident. In order to better understand the sequence of events, I will here include an abbreviated chronology of important events.¹

November 2, 1963: The Board of Overseers adopted a resolution to "take whatever legal action may be necessary and appropriate to secure a judicial determination as to whether we may, consistently with the charitable purposes of Indiana Fletcher Williams, admit qualified persons to Sweet Briar College, regardless of race."

June 3, 1965: The Circuit Court of Amherst County ruled that: 1) no actual controversy exists; 2) the will of Mrs. Williams is not ambiguous and therefore needs no further interpretation; and 3) the application of the cy pres, or deviation doctrine, as contended by Sweet Briar would not be proper.

June 11, 1965: The Board authorized its attorneys to contest and appeal the decision of the Circuit Court. On the same day the college was unable to comply with the "assurance of compliance" form to accompany requests for federal aid. This form assures compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The college was cut off from all federal aid because it was unable to issue such a compliance form.

April 25, 1966: The college filed a complaint with the United States District Court for a temporary restraining order to restrain the County of Amherst and the state from enforcing the racial restrictions of the will on the grounds that it was in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. The temporary restraining order was granted.

May 28, 1966: The Board voted to have an unrestricted admissions policy.

December 2, 1966: The United States District Court decided that the college must exhaust all remedies in the state courts before the federal court could try the case.

January 4, 1967: Sweet Briar College file the case with the Supreme Court.

May 29, 1967: The Supreme Court reversed the judgement of the District Court and remanded the case to the District Court for a decision.

July 17, 1967 The District Court granted a permanent restraining order.

During the late 1950's and early 1960's the faculty began to voice their interest in broadening Sweet Briar by urging the participation of other races in college activities.² They petitioned the president's office three times in 1961 with proposals to bring Negroes to Sweet Briar, once to have a Negro scholar come to teach, once to admit African students, and the third time they endorsed the admission of Negroe students. Although these petitions were not signed by a majority of the faculty, they do indicate an evident interest in broadening the outlook of the school by bringing in other races.

The faculty continued to support the idea of an integrated institution, and in April of 1963 an estimated two thirds of the full-time faculty signed a letter to President Pannell, stating that they were willing to teach Negroe students.³ This faculty pressure, along with pressure from a small but vocal group of alumnae, led the Board of Overseers to take its first action in April, 1963. The Board directed its Executive Committee to review certain provisions of the will of Indiana Fletcher Williams, amoung which were entrance requirements and restrictions. In October, 59 members of the faculty signed a petition for the integration of the college, and later that month the faculty became outraged because they had not been informed that a discussion of the integration issue was to take place. The pressure from the faculty, and a few other considerations, led to a vote by the Board of Overseers in November to:

take whatever legal action may be necessary and appropriate to secure a judicial determination as to whether we may, consistently with the charitable purposes of Indiana

Fletcher Williams, admit qualified persons to Sweet Briar College, regardless of race.⁵

This was the begining of the court battle which lasted for three years.

In March of 1964 a report was prepared by the Faculty Advisory Board concerning faculty views towards racial restrictions.⁶ The report, which was approved unanimously, endorsed, without reservations, the Board of Overseers actions to legally determine whether Sweet Briar could admit students without regard to race. The faculty was again directly active in the case when in May, 1966, they were asked to sign a deposition stating that there would be:

irreparable damage or injury to Sweet Briar College, if the permanent injunction is not granted, by the loss of competent teachers and by the impossibility of giving the kind of educational experience to our students that would best educate them to be members of the modern society.⁷

As well as pressuring the administration, the faculty also supported student opinion. Sweet Briar students were never noticeably active in advocating the integration of Sweet Briar. A 1947 poll taken by the Sweet Briar News indicated that 99 per cent of the students questioned, believed that all races should have equal rights in education, but that half did not "recommend active student opposition to racial discrimination in campus life."⁸ In the same poll 66 per cent said that they did not think that Sweet Briar would ever admit Negroe students.

Opinion did not change much during the next decade. Small groups such as the Y.W.C.A. did meet but did not do much towards advancing integration. In 1961 a small, active group

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of Sweet Briar students participated in demonstrations against segregated lunch counters in Lynchburg.⁹ These students were ostracized when they returned to campus. Most students were against active desegregation, even if they approved of the idea of racial equality. The administration discouraged any action by students to actively bring about desegregation, while the faculty supported the student move.

Student opinion changed gradually during 1961 and 1962. There became some support for the picketing of segregated lunch counters, but there was still disapproval for sit-ins. In 1963 264 students signed a petition advocating an open admissions policy for Sweet Briar. This was the largest show of support yet by the students.

In 1965 and 1966 the heretofore quiet Sweet Briar News began to support the administration's efforts in court. A 1965 editorial in the News advocated desegregation.

Feelings run high on this subject, but it seems more than ridiculous that one of the highest priced woman's institutions should be curtailed financially for the sake of tradition or prejudice. It is not fair to students or faculty, or even the cause and purpose of education itself. If only on purely financial grounds, the News supports the Board's actions in its effort to settle the question of the will.¹⁰

There was never an overwhelming amount of support from the students. The small vocal groups held the limelight and the rest followed along, but never to the point of forcing the administration to consider their point of view. It was not until Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968 that a large number of students showed their support for desegregation.